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The Battle For a Key Committee

An attempt by Sen. David Durenberger of Minnesota to take control of the Senate Intelligence Committee, a move regarded by the Reagan administration as a threat to its policies, poses the first test of how friendly to the White House Sen. Robert J. Dole will be in his new role as majority leader.

Durenberger, normally a mild-mannered moderate, called and held a meeting of the committee on Dec. 3 even though he has not been named chairman. Only two members attended: Durenberger and his fellow moderate Republican ally, Sen. William Cohen of Maine. The remarks of the outgoing chairman, Sen. Barry Goldwater, when told of Durenberger's action, were unprintable. He and several other Republicans were livid.

Angry though they are, the question whether Durenberger in fact becomes chairman in the new Congress rests not with them but with Dole. Consequently, the president's ability to have his national security policies generally backed in a Senate controlled by his own party is enmeshed in tribal relationships and backroom dealings of the world's most exclusive club.

Neither the White House nor conservative Republican senators, including four on the Intelligence Committee in addition to Goldwater, want Durenberger as chairman. They fear his hostility to Reagan's Nicaragua policy, particularly his contempt for the *contra* guerrillas fighting the Sandinista government. They suspect that he takes a benign view of Soviet SALT compliance.

The decision to fight his claim as heir apparent came when Durenberger, speaking as though he were already chairman, told The Washington Post Nov. 29 he will oppose all aid for the *contras*. The conservatives' alternative to him is quite a surprise: Sen. John Chafee.

Overall, Chafee is one of the least conservative Republicans in the Senate and a member of the liberal "Group of Six." But he supports Reagan on Nicaragua and most other national security issues over which the Intelligence Committee exerts extraordinary influence. He might become even more a Reagan loyalist as the just-elected chairman of the Senate Republican Conference and a key lieutenant to his good friend Bob Dole.

The new, uncontested grandee of the Senate has said nothing publicly about how he thinks Durenberger's claim to the chairmanship should be handled. Goldwater bitterly complained to Dole last week about Durenberger's takeover attempt. Dole replied that he had given Durenberger no reason to hope for the chairmanship.

But Dole is correctly known as the most skilled cloakroom maneuverer and deal-maker in the Senate. Nobody could be privy to all the arrangements he might have engineered in his unexpected election as Republican leader. Durenberger's obvious confidence about becoming chairman has evoked vague suspicion in the Republican cloakroom that he may have some sort of encouragement from Dole. The majority leader's intimates confirmed to us that Durenberger did have a hand in his victory.

Durenberger's claim to the chairmanship rests on the "eight-year rule," an often ignored standing order of the Senate that rotates Intelligence Committee members by limiting tenure to eight years. Without the rule, Chafee would be next in line for chairman. With it, he and three conservative senators—Jake Garn of Utah, Richard Lugar of Indiana and Malcolm Wallop of Wyoming—must leave. Next in seniority is Durenberger.

On Sept. 20, Goldwater warned the Senate that the departure of these four Republicans along with four senior Democratic members "would have far-reaching negative consequences" for the Senate and the nation. Goldwater scoffed at the rule's rationale: that rotation would keep the committee from "falling under the spell" of the CIA.

Goldwater is not alone in his criticism of the eight-year rule. Lugar, incoming Foreign Relations Committee chairman, wrote him last June that it would be "irresponsible . . . to jeopardize the committee's ability to analyze intelligence issues from a historical perspective by such a rapid turnover" of membership.

Democrats on the committee would like to strip it of conservative Republicans. Most of them support the rule, but without much passion. Nevertheless, conservative Republicans are suspicious of Durenberger and Cohen, who would head the powerful subcommittee that oversees the super-secret CIA budget if Durenberger becomes chairman. They worry about Durenberger and Cohen lining up Democratic votes in case they have to defend the eight-year rule on the floor of the Senate.

But in fact, Dole's decision will be crucial. If he backs the rule, it will stay; if he wants it changed, it will be changed. What he does will thus reveal not only whether Ronald Reagan starts his second term with a damagingly hostile Senate Intelligence Committee. It will disclose how far Dole may go in fashioning the Senate into a body more independent of the White House than it ever was under Howard Baker.

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